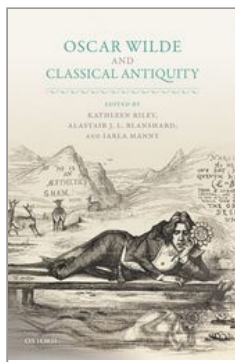


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## Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity

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## Imagining Utopia

Oxford Hellenism and the Aesthetic Alternative

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter presents a cultural-historical analysis of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic criticism, focusing on the use of imperial rhetoric in 'The Critic as Artist' and *The Soul of Man*. It explores the political implications of the Oxford classical curriculum (Greats) through an account of Benjamin Jowett's involvement in designing the Indian Civil Service entrance examination. It is argued that Wilde's critique of the British Empire and the intellectual culture of nineteenth-century England doubles as a critique of the imperialist objectives that defined the Greats curriculum. This analysis pinpoints the anti-imperialist strains which surface in Wilde's critical writing by exploring how the term 'civilized' is deployed in his work. It also addresses how Wilde positions aesthetic consumption as an alternative model of education which enables individuals to engage with Plato's philosophy in the home.

**Keywords:** aestheticcriticism, Benjamin Jowett, classical curriculum, British Empire, Greats, Indian Civil Service, Oxford, Plato, Wilde

Since the publication of Linda Dowling's influential work *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian England* (1994), classical reception scholars have continued to examine the correlations between Plato's philosophy of *eros* and Wilde's use of classical themes to express male-male desire in his aesthetic literature. As well as contributing to our understanding of the institutional culture and politics associated with Oxford Hellenism, Dowling's research has positioned Wilde as an author whose work reflects the positive homosexual discourse that emerged as a result of the Platonic revival at Oxford.<sup>1</sup> More recently, attention has turned to the significance of Wilde's background as a student of Classics. The collective efforts to publish and study archival material from Wilde's undergraduate years have meant that we now know much more about the philosophical works and theories that Wilde studied at Oxford.<sup>2</sup> Following Dowling's example, scholars have looked to Wilde's literary engagement with classicism to draw out the sexual politics of his aesthetic discourse. The fascination with the homoerotic subtext of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Wilde's artful court testimony remains strong in contemporary Wilde scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

**(p.162)** This chapter offers an alternative approach to interpreting Wilde's politics by examining the rhetoric of empire that emerges in 'The Critic as Artist' and *The Soul of Man*. These two works are representative of Wilde's late aesthetic criticism and are concurrent texts, published in 1891.<sup>4</sup> As is the case with most of Wilde's criticism and fiction, both texts were first published in periodicals and were subsequently reissued as books. 'The Critic as Artist' originally appeared in the July and September 1890 issues of the *Nineteenth Century* as 'The True Function and Value of Criticism'; a year later Wilde renamed, revised, and republished the dialogue in *Intentions*.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' was published in the *Fortnightly Review* in February 1891 before being released as a book, entitled *The Soul of Man*, in May 1895. It is unlikely that Wilde was involved in the preparation of this publication, because he was occupied with legal matters at that time, but as Josephine Guy points out, minor typographical and grammatical changes were made by the publisher.<sup>6</sup> This analysis draws on material that has been reproduced in Guy's 2007 *Complete Works* edition of Wilde's criticism, which includes *Intentions* and the 1895 edition of *The Soul of Man*. Given that the content of *The Soul of Man* was not revised by Wilde after its initial publication, it is appropriate to consider the earlier publication date when discussing this literary work. These sources reveal that Wilde's critique of the British Empire and the intellectual culture of nineteenth-century England doubles as a critique of the imperialist objectives which defined the classical curriculum at Oxford.

In order to contextualize the political implications of the Oxford classical curriculum, it is necessary to address Benjamin Jowett's success in establishing Plato as a core component of the Greats curriculum. Through his collaboration with the Indian Civil Service (ICS), Jowett ensured that the knowledge of classical philosophy would have currency outside the university by transforming Oxford into a preparatory ground for Britain's future statesmen. This history also informs the anti-imperialist strains in Wilde's aesthetic criticism, which seeks to undermine the very meaning of the term 'civilized'. Rather than reinforcing the imperialist construction of England as a progressive world power, Wilde maintains that England is uncivilized. By extension, the institution of Oxford Hellenism is also challenged because of its association with the machinery of empire. Wilde implies that the Oxford education **(p.163)** was not assisting in the creation of a new utopian world order, as the academy was failing to produce leaders who would challenge the existing system of government. However, aestheticism offers individuals an alternative approach to engaging with Plato's philosophy outside the university. In both 'The Critic as Artist' and *The Soul of Man*, Wilde presents aestheticism as a modern variation on Plato's model of education, which is introduced in the early books of the *Republic*. He reflects on the aesthete's desire to inhabit beautiful surroundings and reveals that aestheticism—or the love of beauty—involves a uniquely individualized process of learning. The aesthetic approach to education explores ways of experiencing beauty in a culture that tolerates starvation and slavery, and accepts this as a part of 'civilized' society.

### Oxford and Empire: The Politics of Platonism

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The Victorian Hellenic revival unofficially helped to ensure that powerful leadership roles would remain within the hands of the ruling class. Stefano Evangelista highlights some of the ideological implications of a classical education when he states: 'Greek became the language not only of the intellectual, but of the social and political elites, for whom a classics degree (typically from Oxford) was the first step into a career in Parliament, in the Civil Service, or in the Church.'<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Jowett is a significant figure in the history of Oxford University because he introduced major changes which transformed the content and culture of Oxford Classics in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Jowett is best known as the Master of Balliol College and as 'the major translator and commentator of Plato for the late Victorian Age'.<sup>8</sup> He also continued a course of reform that was originally spearheaded by Thomas Arnold, who campaigned for ancient history to be included in the Greats examination and endeavoured to see Aristotle's *Politics* and Plato's *Republic* added to the curriculum. Because Arnold equated the culture of fifth-century Athens and Imperial Rome with that of Victorian England, he believed that 'the study of ancient history [was] of crucial importance in the education of Britain's future statesmen'.<sup>9</sup> Although his plans regarding Plato and Aristotle did not eventuate in his lifetime, he used his appointment as **(p.164)** Regius Professor to give a series of lectures on Aristotle's *Politics*. In these lectures Arnold considered the ways in which Aristotle's treatise could be used to understand 'the problems of modern times and countries'.<sup>10</sup>

After Arnold's death in 1842, Jowett continued the campaign to see Plato included in the Greats curriculum. Like his predecessor, Jowett was also 'determined to find lessons for contemporary life in Plato', in order to endow his students with the knowledge to become wise and virtuous leaders.<sup>11</sup> He paved the way for the English Platonic revival in the late 1840s, when he began to present lectures on Plato's *Republic* to his students at Balliol College.<sup>12</sup> As an educator, Jowett revived the Tractarian style of teaching which encouraged personal interaction between tutors and students, as well as reinforcing the tutor's duty as a spiritual teacher. However, Jowett looked to the culture of teacher-student intimacy as a means of recreating the atmosphere of a classical symposium within the college tutorial.<sup>13</sup> As result of Jowett's innovative teaching practice, Plato was officially included in the classical curriculum in 1853, after new reforms to the examination system came into effect.

Traditionally, the Greats examination had focused on the classical languages, philosophy, and literature. Students were tested on grammar, rhetoric, logic, and moral philosophy by studying the greatest authors in the Western literary tradition. In the 1850s the exam was modified to concentrate on the 'poets and orators, drawn from the Greek historical and philosophical context'.<sup>14</sup> The new emphasis on Greek content, especially philosophical content, was another of Jowett's innovations. The approach to reading classical literature was radically changed, as the curriculum shifted from a 'narrowly grammatical' philological study of ancient texts towards what Dowling describes as 'a powerfully engaged mode of reading which insisted on the vivid contemporaneity and philosophical depths of these works'.<sup>15</sup>

Jowett was responsible not only for instituting major curricular reforms at Oxford, but also for shaping the first competitive recruitment examination for the Indian Civil Service. As the establishment of the ICS recruitment examination coincided with and complemented the mid-century reforms to the Oxford Classics examination, it is important to address the relationship between these two institutions. Dowling rightly identifies Jowett as an individual who 'contributed, perhaps more than anyone else at Oxford, to that **(p.165)** larger intellectual movement within...which Greek studies became a vehicle for channeling modern progressive thought into the Victorian civic elite'.<sup>16</sup> This statement alludes to the broader political implications of Jowett's involvement with the ICS, but if we focus only on the gains that Jowett secured for his students, we miss the underlying politics of exclusion that shaped his agenda for the ICS. That is, Jowett helped to create a bias in the ICS examination which significantly marginalized Indian candidates. Rather than creating a fair and accessible system of recruitment, the ICS implemented a system which ensured that most of the governing power remained in the hands of classically trained English gentlemen and not in the hands of Indian subjects.

Together with Thomas Macaulay, Jowett served on a committee which presented the ICS Board of Control with recommendations for the content and assessment of the ICS entrance examination. In November 1854 Jowett and his fellow committee members produced a report which encouraged the ICS Board to devise a Classics examination that was of the same level of difficulty as the Oxford and Cambridge exams.<sup>17</sup> The committee also advised that a higher margin of points should be allotted to Greek and Latin; therefore, the first exam papers from 1855 reflected a bias towards classical studies. Greek and Latin were awarded a total of 750 points each, English followed with 500 points, whereas modern languages (French, German, and Italian) and oriental classical languages (Sanskrit and Arabic) ranked considerably lower, totalling only 375 points each.<sup>18</sup> The committee's report was the first step towards establishing a connection between Oxford and the ICS. As Phiroze Vasunia expresses it, Jowett's involvement with the ICS 'moved the elite British universities to the centre of training for ICS recruits, specifically by giving Greek and Latin a large weight in the competitive examinations'.<sup>19</sup> Essentially, Jowett made it possible for classically educated Oxford men to gain powerful governing roles within the British Empire.

Over the decades adjustments were made to the ICS scoring system, but classical studies maintained its elevated status as one of the highest-ranking subjects on the ICS examination.<sup>20</sup> The new examination immediately increased the number of ICS recruits who were educated at Oxford and Cambridge. Within five years 60 per cent of successful applicants were Oxbridge men, **(p.166)** although when Wilde was completing his degree in the late 1870s, this trend had reversed.<sup>21</sup> The age limit of ICS candidates had been lowered from 23 to 19 in the 1860s, and for a time this change discouraged students who wished to complete their university degree. The policy was reversed in 1892 to allow candidates to sit the exam at the age of 23, as in the past.<sup>22</sup> This change led to a sudden climax in the number of classically educated recruits in the early 1890s. At this point, the ICS examination was again modified to reflect the content of the classical examinations at the English universities. The original classical component of the ICS examination was bolstered with additional sections on Greek and Roman history and ancient and modern philosophy.<sup>23</sup> These additional subjects advantaged candidates who had passed through the Greats curriculum, to such an extent that Oxford graduates continued to dominate the ICS recruitment system from the 1890s until the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>24</sup>

### In Search of Utopia: Oscar Wilde as Cultural Critic

Oscar Wilde was in a different position from most Oxford students, not only because of his Irish heritage, but because he had commenced a second university degree and was older than most of his peers. The option of joining the Indian Civil Service was not available to him, given the age restrictions. Furthermore, Wilde's decision to study at Oxford was motivated by his ambition to gain a fellowship. Although he achieved a rare double first in Moderations and Greats, an achievement which he described as a 'display of fireworks at the end of my career', these proverbial fireworks did not lead to an academic appointment.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, Wilde left Oxford in 1879 to forge a career as a professional writer in London, but he continued to mention this inspiring place in his personal and published writing.

John Dougill has observed that Wilde is one of many former students who retrospectively idealized Oxford as 'a cloistered utopia, a student paradise, or an Athenian city-state'.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Wilde's nostalgia for Oxford is palpable in a letter dating from October 1885, which was addressed to the newly appointed President of Magdalen College, Herbert Warren. In this congratulatory note, Wilde confesses, 'I often think with some regret of my Oxford days and wish (p. 167) I had not left Parnassus for Piccadilly.'<sup>27</sup> At this stage in his career, Wilde was working as an anonymous reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and was beginning to publish many of the critical works that would feature in his *Intentions* collection.<sup>28</sup> Mount Parnassus is traditionally associated with the worship of Apollo and the Muses, and in Wilde's letter, Parnassus stands for the intellectually robust college setting where he studied Greek literature and produced much of his early poetry. The classicized world of Oxford is, moreover, symbolic of the period before Wilde's professional writing situated him within London's competitive literary marketplace. However, Wilde's knowledge of classical literature had roots, too, in his education in Ireland, where he developed an early interest in Greek tragedy and learned about comedic drama through his tutor at Trinity College Dublin, John Pentland Mahaffy.<sup>29</sup> Wilde was also drawn to aesthetic writers who responded to classical poetry, myth, and historical figures in their work; he was especially fond of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballades* (1866) during his Trinity years.<sup>30</sup>

Overall, when Wilde refers to Oxford in his writing it is in a positive sense. The university is associated with youth and intellectual play, and it is admired for its medieval architecture and blossom-filled gardens. While it is true that Wilde does not overtly criticize Oxford or the classical curriculum in his writings, we may turn to 'The Critic as Artist' and *The Soul of Man* to gauge Wilde's thoughts on the imperialist objective that shaped the pedagogical culture of Victorian Oxford. By the time Wilde released the book and periodical versions of these works in 1891, the tie between the ICS and the Oxford classical curriculum was firmly established and growing stronger.

In 'The Critic as Artist' Wilde wages war against Victorian practicality, though his criticisms can also be interpreted as a comment on the practical rationale of the modernized Greats curriculum. In Part II of the dialogue, Wilde proposes that a professionalized, career-oriented approach to knowledge is not conducive to intellectual progress. Rather, he associates professional practice with intellectual degeneration:

There is no country in the world so much in need of unpractical people as this country of ours. With us, Thought is degraded by its constant association with practice....Each of the professions means a prejudice. The necessity for a career **(p.168)** forces every one to take sides. We live in the age of the overworked, and the under-educated; the age in which people are so industrious that they become absolutely stupid.<sup>31</sup>

This statement reflects the sort of education that Oxford provided in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Oxford pedagogy exposed students to classical thought and assessed their ability to manipulate classical texts in order to address topics that were specific to Victorian politics and culture. According to William Shuter, candidates who read for Greats were 'regularly expected to notice analogies or parallels between the ancient and modern worlds and to examine their validity'.<sup>32</sup> Given that the study of classical and contemporary philosophy unofficially assisted in training students for government service, the reproach 'Thought is degraded by its constant association with practice' extends to the academic culture of Oxford. If we accept Wilde's view that England is an industrialized intellectual wasteland, this is because Greats was accommodating the broader shift towards professionalization and was partially responsible for the surplus of practical people. What Wilde alludes to, but does not make explicit here, is his sense that middle-class professional culture had infiltrated the 'cloistered Utopia' of Oxford. Effectively, Wilde's cultural commentary suggests that Oxford was producing fewer intellectuals because it was so invested in preparing students for professional life outside the university.<sup>33</sup> So, when Wilde remarks that England has entered the age of the overworked and under-educated, he is indirectly pointing to the limitations of the existing system of classical education.

'The Critic as Artist' also undermines the assumption that England is civilized and that the British imperialists have the right to assume control over the colonies, which they deem to be uncivilized. Again, Oxford is not directly mentioned, but Wilde's parodic use of colonial language does evoke the imperialist model of leadership that was facilitated through Oxford Hellenism:



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England will never be civilized till she has added Utopia to her dominions. There is more than one of her colonies that she might with advantage surrender for so fair a land. What we want are unpractical people who see beyond the moment, and think beyond the day. Those who try to lead the people can only do so by following the mob. (CA 181)

**(p.169)** Far from being a civilizing force, Wilde declares that England is not and ‘will never be civilized’ while the empire remains intact: England must *surrender* its colonies in exchange for the fair land of Utopia. Matthew Beaumont argues that Wilde ‘parodies the discourse of imperialism in order to propose an expansion of the empire of the political imagination’.<sup>34</sup> Wilde’s social analysis anticipates that those who are in power cannot possibly sustain their position in the long term, because they are not visionary thinkers who can imagine a world without empire: they ‘try to lead’ by ‘following the mob’. The term ‘mob’ is used in a counter-intuitive sense; it does not refer to the exploited workers who may take to rioting in the streets; rather, Wilde uses this term to refer to the politicians and businessmen who have steered society to prioritize economic growth over intellectual development.<sup>35</sup> We might ask, how does this relate to Oxford? The history between Oxford and the ICS reveals that students of Greats received an education that would grant them access to the Civil Service, where they could assume their position as the next generation of leaders. However, Wilde alerts us to the likelihood that their intelligence would be harnessed to reinforce the present system of colonial occupation, not to invent ways to alter or abolish that system. Between the lines, Wilde proposes that England would be better served if the idea of leadership were aligned with the intellectual pursuit of finding ways to create a prosperous future (to ‘think beyond the day’) without having to perpetuate the devastating cycle of subjugation and exploitation.

In *The Soul of Man*, Wilde’s appropriation of the civilizing discourse takes a darker turn as he begins to evoke images of starvation and slavery to introduce his vision of an aesthetic Utopia. In this essay, Wilde dispassionately concedes that ‘civilization requires slaves. The Greeks were quite right there. Unless there are slaves to do the ugly, horrible, uninteresting work, culture and contemplation become almost impossible’ (*SM* 247). In *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold—son of Thomas Arnold—famously referred to ancient Greek civilization as a culture of ‘sweetness and light’, one that was intellectually superior to that of modern Britain. By contrast, Wilde acknowledges that slavery is the dark counterpoint to the idealized Arnoldian construct of Hellenism. Wilde’s clipped, cutting words suggest that the classical equilibrium between slavery and civilization was defunct in Victorian England. Of course, Wilde’s justification of slavery is ironic, as his vision of Utopia raises the possibility of eliminating the economic and social divisions that prevented people from developing an intellectual life.

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**(p.170)** However, as Wilde reminds us, a large proportion of the English population were so occupied with the basic struggle for survival that they had no opportunity to acquire a basic education, let alone a taste for culture:

[T]here are a great many people who, having no private property of their own, and being always on the brink of sheer starvation, are compelled to do the work of beasts of burden, to do work that is quite uncongenial to them, and to which they are forced by the peremptory, unreasonable, degrading Tyranny of want. These are the poor, and amongst them there is no grace of manner, or charm of speech, or civilization, or culture, or refinement in pleasures, or joy of life. From their collective force Humanity gains much in material prosperity. But it is only the material result that it gains, and the man who is poor is in himself absolutely of no importance. (SM 233-4)

Paul Cantor suggests that Wilde's argument for socialism is motivated by aesthetic concerns, rather than a humanitarian sympathy for the working poor. He senses an air of 'aristocratic disdain' and 'anti-proletarian rhetoric', and contends that Wilde 'ridicules the poor more openly here than elsewhere in his writings'.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, the working poor are characterized as ignorant and barbaric; they lack manners, eloquence, and sophistication, and do not seem to possess any redeeming qualities. Perhaps it is more appropriate to say that the language Wilde employs in the passage above is more detached than disdainful. Although Wilde accepts that this workforce must endure constant degradation, there is no attempt to sentimentalize their plight. Instead, he rationally observes that the instinct for self-preservation has made the poor compliant; they allow themselves to become slaves or beasts of burden in order to stave off starvation. On the other hand, Wilde's attitude towards the working poor also highlights the ideological function of education. 'Charm', 'grace', 'civilization', 'culture', and a taste for refined pleasures are all qualities that are acquired through education. These are also attributes that we associate with the Oxford gentleman who is socially connected, highly educated, politically empowered, and economically advantaged. The poor of England are necessarily lacking in culture and refinement because education, especially classical education, reinforced class divisions.

### Living with Art: The Future of Aestheticism

We have seen that 'The Critic as Artist' and *The Soul of Man* subtly undermine the political aims of the Oxford classical curriculum which Jowett helped to establish. In addition to this, Plato's philosophy can be recognized as another **(p.171)** source that inspires Wilde's representation of aesthetes and the aesthetic lifestyle. In 'The Critic as Artist', the dominant speaker, Gilbert, expresses Wilde's long-held view that aesthetic appreciation is fostered in response to beautiful surroundings. Importantly, Gilbert tells his friend Ernest that this idea derives from Plato's aesthetic philosophy:

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You remember that lovely passage in which Plato describes how a young Greek should be educated, and with what insistence he dwells upon the importance of surroundings...Insensibly, and without knowing the reason why, he is to develop that real love of beauty which, as Plato is never weary of reminding us, is the true aim of education. By slow degrees there is to be engendered in him such a temperament as will lead him naturally and simply to choose the good in preference to the bad, and, rejecting what is vulgar and discordant, to follow by fine instinctive taste all that possesses grace and charm and loveliness. (CA 191)

In this lyrical paraphrase of the *Republic* (401b–402a), Gilbert interprets Plato's philosophy as a precursor to the nineteenth-century aesthetic movement; he forms a seamless link between ancient Greece and modern culture, as if he were a student of Greats.<sup>37</sup> When Socrates examines how aesthetics can be used to serve a pedagogical end in the *Republic*, he argues that the state should have the power to prevent poets and craftsmen from 'represent[ing] a character that is bad, intemperate, illiberal, and graceless, in their images of living beings, in their buildings, or in any other products of their craft' (ἢ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις δημιουργοῖς ἐπιστατητέον καὶ διακωλυτέον τὸ κακὸν καὶ ἀκόλαστον καὶ ἀνελεύθερον καὶ ἄσχημον μήτε ἐν εἰκόσι ζώων μήτε ἐν οἰκοδομήμασι μήτε ἐν ἄλλῳ μηδενὶ δημιουργουμένων ἐμποιεῖν, Plato, *Rep.* 401b)).<sup>38</sup> The plan to limit the scope of artistic representation is justified as the surest way to create a beautiful learning environment for the next generation of warriors—the Guardians—who will be educated to honour and defend their city. It is assumed that if the state is able to shield the Guardians from images that depict ugly human characteristics, these young warriors will reflect the beauty of their physical surroundings through their conduct in adulthood. While Plato's aesthetics concentrates on the artist's role in providing the community with highly influential models of human behaviour, Wilde's aestheticism emphasizes the personal pleasure that can be derived from the repeated exposure to art objects. Therefore, when Gilbert speaks of 'rejecting what is vulgar and discordant' and cultivating an 'instinctive taste', we can infer that the *true* aesthetic education is a matter of learning how to discern beauty in a marketplace that is saturated with cheaply made, mass-produced goods. However, the formation of this aesthetic instinct is a highly personal **(p.172)** undertaking; it is not the sort of lesson that can be communicated by a teacher or a textbook; rather, it is a form of knowledge that we absorb from our environment. As Wilde remarked in an interview with the *New York Tribune*: 'you cannot teach a knowledge of the beautiful; it must be revealed... the knowledge of the beautiful is personal and can only be acquired by one's own eyes and ears. This truth was the origin of the theory of beautiful surroundings.'<sup>39</sup>

Wilde's dialogue with the *Republic* also extends to *The Soul of Man*, where he engages with the notion that artistic production should be regulated by the state. Wilde revises Socrates' argument to support the intellectual and creative freedom of artists. He goes a step further, claiming that artists are within their rights to limit the agency of consumers in order to end the supply of hideous homewares. Again, the uncomfortable juxtaposition between civilization and starvation resurfaces, as Wilde exaggerates the success of the aesthetic movement:

People have been to a very great extent civilized. It is only fair to state, however, that the extraordinary success of the revolution in house-decoration and furniture and the like has not really been due to the majority of the public developing a very fine taste in such matters. It has been chiefly due to the fact that the craftsmen of things so appreciated the pleasure of making what was beautiful, and woke to such a vivid consciousness of the hideousness and vulgarity of what the public had previously wanted, that they simply starved the public out. (SM 260)

Where the Oxford Hellenists failed in their civilizing enterprise, Wilde declares that the community of craftsmen have already civilized England by imposing their 'official' standard of beauty on the entire population: 'However they may object to it, people *must* nowadays have something charming in their surroundings' (*Soul* 260; my emphasis). In this case, the reference to starvation frames aestheticism as a gentler form of tyranny.<sup>40</sup> Despite Wilde's confident tone, readers of *The Soul of Man* (in 1895 and 1891) would have known that the popularity of the aesthetic movement did not produce any grand-scale cultural and social changes. More to the point, the so-called 'revolution in house-decoration and furniture' had reached its peak in the early 1880s and was fading into an outmoded fashion trend by the 1890s.<sup>41</sup> Wilde's work as a promoter of aestheticism would have been complete if it were possible to force **(p.173)** aestheticism on the public. On the contrary, his essay reflects that the future of aestheticism depended on the public's willingness to acquire beautifully crafted objects for their homes. The state which produced the 'Tyranny of Want' could not be trusted to insulate its citizens from ugliness, and so Wilde encourages his audience to assume this responsibility for themselves. He entices consumers to fill their homes with aesthetic furnishings that stimulate both the mind and the senses. As more people embrace aesthetic interior decoration and allow time for aesthetic appreciation, the more likely it is that the overall standard of living will improve with time. If the consumers of tomorrow are accustomed to using and appreciating finely crafted objects, then they will surely refuse to tolerate any form of ugliness. Following this logic, we might imagine that the next generation of aesthetes will be the ones to create a progressive, economically inclusive society where art-lovers and intellectuals abound.

'The Critic as Artist' and *The Soul of Man* are works which shed light upon Wilde's resistance towards the culture of classical education which was instituted at Oxford. Although Wilde's letter to Herbert Warren demonstrates that he was attached to Oxford and even idealized this place as his lost Parnassus, he maintained enough critical distance to question the model of leadership that Oxford was perpetuating through the Greats curriculum. Jowett's curricular reforms validated classical philosophy as an area of study which could provide England with a steady flow of new recruits to serve the nation and the British Empire. Moreover, the correlation between Oxford and Empire gained traction as the ICS entrance exam created a high demand for classically trained government officials. Yet Wilde's aesthetic criticism warns us that the Oxford classical curriculum was far from perfect. The current generation of civil servants were taught to follow protocols, and this meant ignoring the economic and cultural biases which were sustained through the imperial system of government.

If Greats reinforces the culture of 'the overworked' and 'under-educated', as Wilde suggests, then the revival of Plato's philosophy is also part of the solution to England's intellectual malaise. Wilde's aesthetic discourse empowers individuals, reminding them that it is not necessary to be affiliated with Oxford in order to interact with Plato's philosophy. Students at Oxford directed their attention to the political significance of Plato's *Republic*, but Wilde asks us to view this text as the cornerstone of nineteenth-century aestheticism. The 'theory of beautiful surroundings' is established in Plato's dialogue, and therefore anybody who appreciates the pleasure of living with beautiful, well-made objects is following in the tradition of Plato's aestheticism. Granted, this type of aesthetic practice would not have an immediate effect on the existing political climate, that which is associated with colonial expansion and the dehumanization of the working poor. However, Wilde's critical works invite us to view aestheticism as the path towards progress, albeit **(p.174)** one that begins with small-scale, personal changes which occur in the home. The pursuit of beauty is also a political matter, as the voice of the Wildean aesthete calls us to begin the work of imagining utopia. This sentiment is beautifully articulated by Wilde in *The Soul of Man* when he writes: 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing....Progress is the realization of Utopias' (SM 247).<sup>42</sup>

### Notes:

(<sup>1</sup>) Dowling, (1994), 66.

<sup>(2)</sup> Iain Ross's *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece* (2013) has significantly contributed to this field of scholarship. To date, it is the only comprehensive study that addresses Wilde's engagement with contemporary debates in classical scholarship and the emerging field of archaeology. Smith and Hefland's edition of *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks* (1989) is another key resource.

<sup>(3)</sup> I am reflecting on the research that has preceded this publication. See Evangelista (2009), Orrells (2011), and Endres (2005), 303–16. This body of research has influenced my study of Wilde's Platonism in 'An Aesthetic Education: Oscar Wilde and Victorian Oxford', PhD thesis, University of Melbourne (2015).

<sup>(4)</sup> These works are also linked through Wilde's introduction to *The Soul of Man*, which positions the essay as an extension of 'The Critic as Artist'. In the opening paragraph Wilde writes: 'as I pointed out some time ago in an article on the function of criticism, it is much more easy to have sympathy with suffering than it is to have sympathy with thought' (Wilde 2007, 231). This alludes to the original title of 'Critic', which self-consciously evokes Matthew Arnold's 1864 essay, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'.

<sup>(5)</sup> *Nineteenth Century* Wilde (2007), li–liv.

<sup>(6)</sup> Ibid. xci–xcii.

<sup>(7)</sup> Evangelista (2009), 9–10.

<sup>(8)</sup> Turner (1981), 414.

<sup>(9)</sup> Ellis (2007), 46–63, at 53. Arnold's understanding of history was informed by Giambattista Vico's theory of life cycles, which assumed that nations underwent the same stages of development as individuals, progressing from youth to maturity and decline. Vico's theory of historical cycles appeared in his 1725 philosophical treatise *New Science*, which was originally published in Italian as *Scienza Nuova* (Pompa 1990, 1–2).

<sup>(10)</sup> Ellis (2007), 46–63, at 51. Ellis is quoting Thomas Arnold in A. P. Stanley's *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold* (Stanley 1846, 590).

<sup>(11)</sup> Turner (1981), 431–2. Turner is referring to Jowett's translations of Plato in this instance, but this statement equally applies to his work as an educator.

<sup>(12)</sup> Dowling (1994), 68.

<sup>(13)</sup> *ibid.* 36–44,

<sup>(14)</sup> Bowen (1989), 175.

<sup>(15)</sup> Dowling (1994), 64. For an analysis of the notes Wilde compiled while he was studying Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Plato's *Republic* in preparation for the Greats exam, see Bristow, Ch. 4 in this volume.

<sup>(16)</sup> Dowling (1994), 64.

<sup>(17)</sup> Vasunia (2005), 35–71, at 45. This historical data is also reproduced in *The Classics and Colonial India* (Vasunia 2013, 193–235).

<sup>(18)</sup> Vasunia (2005), 46.

<sup>(19)</sup> Ibid. 44.

<sup>(20)</sup> *ibid.* 35–71,

<sup>(21)</sup> Ibid. 46.

<sup>(22)</sup> Ibid. 47–51.

<sup>(23)</sup> Ibid. 52–3.

<sup>(24)</sup> *ibid.* 35–71,

<sup>(25)</sup> Letter to William Ward (24 July 1878), in Wilde (2000a), 70.

<sup>(26)</sup> Dougill (1998), 5.

<sup>(27)</sup> Letter to Herbert Warren (18 Oct. 1885), in Wilde (2000a), 265.

<sup>(28)</sup> Ellmann suggests that Wilde became a regular contributor to the *Pall Mall Gazette* in early 1885 (Ellmann 1988, 263). In the same year, Wilde published an early version of 'The Truth of Masks' (originally entitled 'Shakespeare and Stage Costume') in the *Nineteenth Century* (Guy and Small 2000, 46–7).

<sup>(29)</sup> For more on the relationship between Wilde and Mahaffy, see Blanshard, Ch. 1 in this volume. According to Ellmann (1988, 22–3), Wilde's fascination with Greek tragedy began at Portora College, where he was first introduced to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. For a comparative study of Euripides' *Ion* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, see Ross (2013) 173–82.

<sup>(30)</sup> Ellmann (1988), 31.

<sup>(31)</sup> 'The Critic as Artist' in Wilde (2007), 179–80. Henceforth cited as CA.

<sup>(32)</sup> Shuter (2003), 250–78, at 254–5.

<sup>(33)</sup> Walter Pater was also critical of the standardized system of testing, which created a need for tutors to coach their students to perform well in exams. On one occasion he is said to have remarked, 'at present the undergraduate is a child of nature: he grows up like a wild rose in a country lane: you want to turn him into a turnip, rob him of all grace, and plant him out in rows' (Shuter 1988, 41–58, at 52).

<sup>(34)</sup> Beaumont (2004), 13–29 at 24.

<sup>(35)</sup> In *The Soul of Man* the 'mob' is more closely aligned with journalists who reinforce the values of the bourgeois public when reviewing art and literature, often at the expense of artists. For instance, Wilde writes: 'It was a fatal day when the public discovered that the pen is mightier than the paving-stone...They at once sought for the journalist, found him, developed him, and made him their industrious and well-paid servant' (Wilde 2007, 254–5; henceforth cited as *SM*).

<sup>(36)</sup> Cantor (1997), 74–93, at 77.

<sup>(37)</sup> In Ch. 4 of this volume Bristow has reproduced some of Wilde's notes on the *Republic*. For further commentary on this subject, see De Groot and Kaye, 'The Importance of Reading Plato: "Plato's Psychology": An unpublished essay', *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 Oct. 2003, 16.

<sup>(38)</sup> I am quoting Reeve's 2012 translation of the *Republic*.

<sup>(39)</sup> 'The Theories of a Poet', *New York Tribune*, 8 Jan. 1882, 7. Repr. in Hofer and Scharnhorst (2010), 19.

<sup>(40)</sup> Jarlath Killeen has interpreted 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' (1891) as an ironic critique of the British occupation of Ireland; the reference to starvation, therefore, can also be understood as an allusion to the Irish famine. As he explains: 'The dissonance between starvation and the laws of progress were [*sic*] hardly unfamiliar to Wilde as he came from a country considered to be the very antithesis of progress and evolution' (Killeen 2005, 133).

<sup>(41)</sup> Danson (1997), 23.

<sup>(42)</sup> I would like to thank my PhD supervisors at the University of Melbourne, Clara Tuite and James H. Kim On Chong-Gossard. Their guidance and expertise have been instrumental in shaping my study of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic Hellenism. I acknowledge the insights of my colleagues, Grace Moore, James Patrick O'Maley, and Katherine Firth, who responded to earlier drafts of this chapter. I also thank my editor, Kathleen Riley, for her support and assistance throughout the publication process. Her keen eye and thoughtful response have further strengthened this research.





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